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The End of Personnel? Managing Human Resources in Turbulent Environments

Introduction

Organizations have to cope with an increasingly turbulent environment requiring often rapid adaptation. Combined with the growing pressure from the economic system towards greater efficiency and often identical or at least highly similar technological processes, people become a crucial resource for organizational success. Without adequately qualified and motivated members an organization hardly can cope with these developments. In turn, this makes the management of human resources a crucial task for the management of an organization. In current HRM and management thinking, this is something of a no-brainer and belongs to common wisdom in HRM (see, e.g. Boxall/Purcell/Wright 2007).

However, human resources are different from other resources in a number of ways: they have their own ambitions, they change constantly, they cannot be influenced in a straightforward and simple way, they react in surprising ways to external and internal stimuli, in other words: they are non-trivial machines (von Foerster/Bröcker 2002). Linking the behavior of these non-trivial machines to the overall organizational goals is a difficult, yet essential task for successful management. In the past, organizations mainly used standard employment to trivialize them, i.e. turn people into personnel with various kinds of capital that can be used for achieving organizational goals. HR-specialists played a major role in this when recruiting, training, appraising and compensating personnel, nearly exclusively interpreted as organizational members entering an explicit, labor-law based as well as an implicit psychological contract. Linked with – and potentially caused by – a number of partly drastic changes in the organizational context, a new view of HRM reality ('what it is'), the impact of HRM ('what it means) and the role and profile of HR professionals ('who it is') seems to emerge (see, e.g. Losey/Meisinger/Ulrich 2005).

It goes far beyond this paper and the special issue to illustrate the broad spectrum of changes in the context as well as in HRM. However, we would like to emphasize three areas linked with each other that exemplify these changes: a greater variety in the employer-employee-relationships with organizations more often using capacities of

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people that formally do not belong to the company; this changing configuration of individuals constituting 'personnel' for organizations requires changes in the HR function; and, at a theoretical level, this also creates the need for further developing the concept of HRM. We argue that these changes – and, we hasten to add, many of the other changes that we can see in HRM – are a consequence of the shift from personnel management to HRM, i.e. they are built into the HRM concept.

The concept of HRM

As a concept, HRM emerged in the USA during the early 1980s. Two specific frameworks (Beer et al. 1985; Fombrun/Tichy/Devanna 1984) mark the start of the concept of HRM and, at the same time, the start for a partly heated discussion about the specifics of this concept and its relationship to personnel management (see, e.g., Armstrong 2000; Legge 2005; Süß 2004). Basically, however, there seems to be a fair degree of consensus about five major characteristics of the HRM concept. First, HRM emphasizes the necessity of integrating HR activities across a variety of functions and with the organizational strategic orientation (Boxall/Purcell 2003; Schuler/Jackson 2000; Lengnick-Hall/Lengnick-Hall, 1988). In practice, we see a 'two camp landscape' in HRM. In one group of organizations, HRM clearly is an integral part of the strategic processes, playing a role already in the early stages of the process and being a valued player. In another group, HRM has an important role, but is clearly subordinate. It plays a role in strategic processes only at a later stage. Second, line managers play a crucial role in the concept of HRM. Linked to general developments such as new organizational forms (Whittington et al. 1999), the delayering of organizations (Morden 1997) leading to less middle-managers or the increasing cost pressures especially for so called non-productive units, the size of HR departments relative to the number of employees has been reduced over the past decade (Brewster, Wood, Brookes/van Ommeren 2006). Thus, organizations are moving away from large, centralized (staff) units and assign more responsibility and resources to 'local' or 'front line' managers. In turn, this has a direct effect for the HR department: It has to think about new ways of supplying the necessary services, performing its functions and equipping line managers with the necessary skills and competencies to handle the new HR tasks that they are confronted with. Third, HRM emphasizes the link between HR work and organizational performance. While there is a broad and sometimes passionate discussion about the performance effects of HRM activities and different approaches explaining the link to organizational performance (Delery/Doty 1996), a common tendency seems to emerge: at least under specific conditions and in certain combinations, HRM has a positive impact on firm performance, even though the size of the effects often is comparatively small (see, e.g. Bowen/Ostroff 2004; Wright/Gardner/Moynihan 2003;Huselid/Jackson/Schuler 1997). Fourth, there is less emphasis on collective forms of interaction and representation in the relationship between the individual and the organization. Individual negotiations of work contracts or the decay of collective forms of representation such as trade unions or works councils are examples here. Fifth, HRM signals a value laden focus shift. Building on the human relations movement, personnel management was based on the idea of balancing individual and organizational interests. HRM is different in this respect, too. It clearly prioritizes organ-

izational performance and regards individual interests not as a value in itself but a restriction which has to be met when pursuing organizational goals. Critics, especially from a European background, point towards a narrowness of perspective and the ignorance of potential other focuses, stakeholders and outcomes of HRM (see, e.g., Guest 1990; Legge 2005).

Looking at these core characteristics of HRM that have evolved over time, the changing configuration of what is regarded as 'personnel', i.e. the individuals providing capitals and constituting problem solving capacity, is hardly surprising. Based on the value shift from 'balance' to 'priority of organizational interests', the strong strategic orientation, the clear emphasis on organizational performance as well as the increasing individualization of employer-employee relationship pave the way for broadening the view about what personnel is. This is further supported by tendencies of deregulation in many countries. The situation in Europe is a good example for this. Linked to the efforts of the EU to create a single market and to global tendencies of reducing competitive barriers, e.g. talks in international institutions such as the WTO, one can see serious efforts to open up national markets through deregulating national environments. However, national interests as well as various interest groups such as trade unions sometimes do have conflicting interests due to the clientele they are representing. The tension between flexibility tendencies promoted by a coalition of EU institutions and employers' association and security concerns voiced by trade unions, some political parties and non-governmental organizations such as ATTAC not only provides a typical example for the heavy interdependence between HRM and its external environment at least in contexts such as Europe. It also shows that despite these tensions, the deregulation efforts have led to results, e.g. an institutional framework allowing greater flexibility of employment relations.

New personnel and its consequences for HRM

The 'new' kind of personnel that HRM is dealing with is characterized by individuals who do not have a standard work contract and partly are outside of the organization, i.e. not on the regular payroll. It is reflected in a number of discourses. Arguably, the discussion about the growing number of self-employed individuals, non-standard employment relationships and forms of international work beyond classic expatriation as well as the changing psychological contract and the emerging new – as opposed to 'traditional' – careers are the most prominent examples for this.

New forms of employment labeled newly self-employed, one-person employers, dependent independents, own account self-employed or free agents (Mayrhofer/ Meyer 2001; Gould/Weiner/Levin 1997) are on the rise. The same is true for non-standard work arrangements such as part-time, fixed term, temporary or tele-work. Also when it comes to working internationally, new forms emerge. Labels such as self-initiated movers, international itinerates, business travelers, international commuters or flexpatriates are used to describe part of this international personnel (Mayrhofer/ Sparrow/Zimmermann 2008; Mayerhofer et al. 2004). Summarizing this, Briscoe and Schuler (2004: 223) observe that the definition of "international employee" inside organizations has continued to expand: "… the tradition of referring to all international employees as expatriates – or even international assignees – falls short of the need for

international HR practitioners to understand the options available…and fit them to evolving international business strategies". There are now a wide range of options that can enable the global resourcing of work in organizations.

The relationship between individuals and organizations is not only governed by explicit formal regulations such as work contracts, collective agreements or labor laws, but also by psychological contracts. They contain a set of mutual expectations, perceptions, and informal obligations governing the relationship between two parties. In the world of work, psychological contracts have specific significance for the relationship between organizations and their members. They provide the basis for relationship dynamics, including the benchmark against which violations of tacit expectations are measured (see, e.g. Rousseau 1995; Herriot;Manning/Kidd 1997). Relational psychological contracts emphasize a more long-term view rooted in shared ideals and values, mutual respect and interpersonal support leading, among others, to expectations of loyalty from the individual and job security on the side of the organization. In contrast, transactional psychological contracts emphasize a calculative engagement based on a quid-pro-quo relationship where the mutual exchange has to be gratifying on a short-term basis. Over the past two decades, the dominant model seems to have shifted from relational to transactional. This leads, among others, to less emphasis on stability, permanence, predictability, fairness, tradition and mutual respect and favors self-reliance, flexibility and adaptability.

'Traditional' careers are associated with a mechanistic ladder system where "age and seniority is highly correlated" (Nicholson 1996: 45). More or less predictable patterns lead to typical career stages (Levinson 1978) within few organizations which are primarily responsible for the entire career management (Sullivan 1999: 458). However, since the early 1990s the picture seems to change. Major change drivers such as increasing competition, internationalization, globalization or deregulation not only left their footprints at the macro-level of societies and economies (see e.g., Iellatchitch/Mayrhofer 2004) and at the organizational level (see, e.g., the discussion about new organizational forms, Whittington et al. 1999). They also lead to new forms of individual careers (e.g., Swaim/Torres 2005; Thomas, Lazarova/Inkson 2005; Arthur/Inkson/Pringle 1999) with sometimes flashy labels for careers such as protean (Hall 1996), boundaryless (Arthur/Rousseau 1996), portfolio (Templer/Cawsey 1999), post-corporate (Peiperl/Baruch 1997), nomad (Cadin et al. 2000), chaotic (Peterson/Anand 2002), spiral (Brousseau et al. 1996), multidirectional (Baruch 2004), chronically flexible (Iellatchitch/Mayrhofer/Meyer 2003) or simply new (Parker/Inkson 1999; Arnold 1997). Tellingly for the career research tradition, many contributions have an implicit notion of liberation and freedom (see, e. g. Arthur et al. 1999; Arthur/Rousseau 1996; Hall/Associates 1996). More skeptical observers, however, point towards a lack of predictability, insecurity and a risk shift from organizations to individuals who increasingly carry the cost for increased flexibility (see, e. g. Nef 2001; Bridges 1994). Linked with this is the notion of a new ownership of careers. Traditionally, career development was done by organizations (see, e. g. Schein 1978; Glaser 1968). However, in new careers, the individual increasingly is responsible for the career. Positive aspects of this are enhanced opportunities for individual learning, the diffusion of ideas and personal reinvention (Gunz/Evans/Jalland 2002: 59). Nev-

ertheless, there is the potential danger of overburdening individuals with the sole responsibility for their careers instead of taking into account the interplay between actors and their environment.

Given the new kind of personnel, practical HR work faces new tasks. First, and foremost, classical HR functions as well as tools have to be re-assessed in the light of the new kind of personnel. Examples for questions arising in organizations include: To what extent do we have to change our recruitment and selection procedures if we do not hire people, but select them for doing work for us 'outside' the organization, e.g. in terms of the criteria we use or their relative weight? How do we make sure that adequate training and development measures are applied not only to organizational members, but to all types of personnel? Are different compensation systems necessary for different types of personnel? How do we assess the performance and the development of different types of employees with different formal status?

Second, the role of HRM professionals has most likely to be at least partly redefined. If human resource management no longer deals with organizational members only, but with personnel of very different formal status and only partly covered by the usual organizational tools and hierarchy, then also the role of HRM professionals and the related competencies have to be re-thought. For example, HRM professionals increasingly grow into a boundary-spanning role (Thushman/Scanlan 2005; Aldrich/Herker 1977) where they have to understand different system logics, have to cope with different and partly conflicting role expectations coming from a greater variety of stakeholders and have an increasing importance as 'translators' between different types of personnel as well as between this new kind of personnel and top-management. For example, when personnel becomes more internationally diverse, competencies and behavior previously only relevant for HRM professionals working with a small international workforce suddenly become crucial when dealing with all of personnel.

Third, the management of the relationship between different types of personnel becomes crucial. Managing people doing similar work but belonging to different categories of personnel with, most often, varying degrees of employment security, compensation schemes and access to organizational fringe benefits means most often also managing conflicts. Examples from Germany after the fall of the iron curtain in 1990 abound where, due to the legal framework, employees coming from the the Federal Republic and working in civil service in the 'new Länder' were doing the same work as the locals, but were paid according to a different scheme. These examples clearly illustrate that this is not an easy situation demanding a lot of conflict management skills, ability to understand different positions of self-interest and handling structural contradictions, e.g. same work, different pay.

Both the new kind of personnel and the changes in practical HR work require some rethinking of the existing theoretical concepts of HRM. Most prominently, this refers to the 'object' of HRM, i.e. the individuals providing capital and capacity, the tools and the integration of contextual aspects into HRM theory.

Current theorizing on HRM is almost exclusively built on the implicit notion of equating human resources with organizational members. Looking at classical HRM

functions such as recruitment, appraisal, training and development or compensation, being an organizational member is the point of reference for much of the debate. In older textbooks, there is an additional notion of relative homogeneity. Two developments in the past couple of decades have strongly contributed to a change in this notion: the increasing amount of doing business across national and cultural borders and the growing diversity of the workforce in terms of sex, age, ethnic background, religious orientation etc. However, we argue that this change has not yet found its way into HRM theorizing. To be sure, there are a number of approaches that take into account different groups and divisions in the workforce, e.g. older workers or sex composition. However, for much of HRM theorizing these specifics are still only embryonic. For example, compensation and incentive management (for an overview see Rynes/Gerhart 2000) is one of the areas where these differences potentially play a crucial role since it is most likely that group differences are also reflected in motivational structure, professional and private goals or value structure. Yet, there is little evidence beyond the very first steps that HRM thinking about compensation and incentives takes this into account. In a similar vein, this is also true for tool development, i.e. the more applied aspect of theorizing. As outlined above, if the whole set of HRM tools and instruments is under scrutiny due to a changing configuration of personnel, then the theoretical rationale behind also has to be questioned and further developed. For example, while the set of competencies serving as a point of reference for recruitment and selection as well as training and development most likely will remain unchanged, the relative importance of different sets of competencies for different types of personnel and the theoretical rational for this remains to be fully explored. Hence, 'diversity HRM' going beyond the mere inclusion of different groups of personnel is an issue further to be explored. Finally, including the contextual dimension into HRM theorizing is of paramount importance. At the latest since the perspective change from personnel to human resource management and the rise of strategic human resource management as a concept, context clearly has an important conceptual role in HRM. Yet, to a large extent the precise role of context and its various sub-segments is largely unexplored. Theoretical concepts developed in other areas of social inquiry potentially can help here. For example, institutional theories exploring the role of various institutional arrangements (for an overview see, e.g. Walgenbach/Meyer 2007) for organizations offer a framework that could be integrated into HRM theorizing to a greater extent.

Contributions in this special issue

In the wake of changing personnel, the contributions in this special issue respond to these three issues. The first group of articles by *Dütschke* and *Boerner*, *Richardson*, and *Näsholm* deal with 'new' kinds of personnel within and across national boundaries. The final two contributions focus on the concept of HRM. While *Tobey* and *Beson* put an emphasis on the process of carrying out HR functions, *Boselie* suggests a theoretical model of what determines HRM.

Elisabeth Dütschke and *Sabine Boerner* in their contribution approach the increase in variety of employer-employee relationships. While there is a rise in number of organizations using non-standard work arrangements, flexible work today co-exists with

standard employment, the latter still being the norm for organizations as well as individuals. One of the factors that will influence if and how standard and flexible employment will (co-)exist in the future is the permeability of boundaries between these forms of employment. The authors tackle the question of permeability by analyzing the impact of prior flexible employment on future prospects for standard employment. In two field experiments they confront HR Managers from randomly chosen companies with fictitious CVs and an imaginary standard employment position. The CVs varied in interorganizational mobility, type of work contract and working hours. The results show that former part-time employees have lower chances for standard employment. HR managers rate them low in flexibility, motivation, potential for development and permanence. In contrast, former fixed term contracts have a positive impact on the probability of future standard employment.

Julia Richardson focuses on teleworkers as a particular group of 'flexworkers'. In particular, she examines relationships between managers and flexworkers and between flexworkers from an interpretative interactionist perspective. Interviews with seventy six flexworkers who were provided with laptop and IT-infrastructure and were working from home two or more days per week were conducted. Four dominant themes emerged in participants' accounts of their relationships with managers, other flexworkers and office-based colleagues: trust, communication, cohesion and the impact of relationships with family members. All these themes are closely connected to interaction, identity and significant others as central themes. The issue of trust reflects interpretive interactionist conceptions of how individuals draw on their interactions with others to inform subsequent behavior. Autonomy is seen as a sign of trust and increases willingness to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors. The centrality of interaction clearly comes through in the theme of communication. Within the theme of cohesion, mechanisms for ensuring 'visibility' reflect interpretive interactionist conceptions of identity construction. The issue of relationships stresses the importance of 'significant others' since with telework separate groups of 'significant others' i.e. families, colleagues and managers operate in closer proximity.

Malin Näsholm reflects on the variety of international work, focusing on international itinerates as a 'new' form of international personnel. International itinerates are independent internationally mobile professionals not relying on traditional organizational career arrangements. Their careers involve multiple transitions between countries and organizations. When moving to new social settings, individuals typically engage in self-reflection and identity construction processes. Accordingly, the author studies this group from an identity construction perspective. A narrative analysis of four interviews with international itinerates revealed family, the original home nationality, networks, personal development and of careers as narrative categories. These international itinerants find other ways of defining their place than their organizational belonging and original nationality, both of which are found to be ambiguous. By defining what they are not identifying themselves with, they emphasize their uniqueness and self reliance in their identity construction. At the same time, they are constrained by other boundaries and commitments that simultaneously limit their freedom and enable them to define who they are. They rely on commitments such as to their own careers in order to reconstruct their identities

throughout transitions. The identification with their networks across national and organizational boundaries plays an important part in their social identities.

David H. Tobey and *Phil G. Benson*, while stressing the importance of performance, challenge simple input-output relationships between HRM and performance where human capital is often treated as a mere asset. As a new approach, they suggest a cognitive view of HRM which sees human resources as dynamic stocks and flows of individual competencies and relationships that combine to form flexible configurations of organizational capability necessary to address rapidly changing requirements. HRM from this perspective means managing capabilities and mental capacities. The authors argue that findings from cognitive science can be used as a theoretical background for explaining how HRM guides mental efforts in the direction of improved performance and predicting characteristics of methods successful in increasing mental capabilities and consequent performance of employees. A cognitive action approach to human resources makes HRM responsible for the most important and perishable of organizational resources as opposed to being perceived as a non-strategic asset management department. Applying a cognitive view on HRM also means carrying out HR functions differently from the *status quo*. For performance management, e.g., cognitive action-based view strongly supports the existing notion that goals should be specific, measurable, attainable, relevant and time-bound and that developmental feedback is more effective than individual critique in improving individual performance.

Paul Boselie addresses the lacking theoretical foundation of HRM. He suggests a Strategic Balanced Perspective that is based on the Contextually Based Human Resource Theory developed by Paauwe (2004). This perspective argues that HRM is the result of market mechanisms, institutional mechanisms and the configuration of the specific organization, combineing elements from new institutionalism (institution) and resource based view of the firm (market, configuration). In a case study at a national branch with around 30,000 employees of a large MNC, the author focuses on testing and validating the Strategic Balanced Perspective. The study shows that market, institutional and configurational factors influence HRM significantly and substantially. It also reveals that the way in which these dimensions affect HRM is complex and not always visible. The three dimensions are often interrelated, sometimes even hard to clearly distinguish and there are many potential interactions between them. The connections between the three groups of factors in a way provide additional support for the Strategic Balanced Perspective since ignoring one of the dimensions could seriously disturb the organizational balance between market pressures, institutional pressures and the organization's own historical roots.

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